

Paul Willis podcast series: transcript

Part 1: Why undertake collaborative research with older people and the benefits

Access the podcast audio and other resources related to the LOASCA project here: <https://www.scie.org.uk/older-lgbtq-people-and-social-care/loasca/>

Professor Paul Willis

Hello, I'm Professor Paul Willis from Cardiff University. Welcome to our three part series on collaborative social care research of older people funded by the NIHR School for Social Care Research. You'll be hearing some fascinating insights from our co-researchers and expert advisors, older people who have experience of receiving and working in adult social care.

Reshma

Older people are not seen as a sexy topic for research, mainly everyone's concerned about children and families.

Graham

I'm approaching 84, totally without sigh and I want to be valued as a person.

Cecilia

It's very hard to recruit trans people to be involved in research.

Julian

As a retired academic, I was interested to try and be able to continue to use some of my research experience.

Professor Paul Willis

Those soundbites come from contributors from two projects running parallel. SWOP, which stands for Social Work of Older People and LOASCA, which is a study about inclusive care assessments for older LGBTQ+ adults. Like the full time academics involved in these studies, they're great advocates for research about older people being done collaboratively and in this first podcast of the series, we explore why you might choose to work that way. What are the benefits and how can it make research

feel more rewarding? First let's hear from the principal investigators on what the two projects set out to do. Here's Dr Denise Tanner from the University of Birmingham on the SWOP study.

Dr Denise Tanner

The two main aims of the SWOP project were to make visible social work with older people. So to really unpick what it is that social workers with older people do and how they do it and what impact it has on older people. And the second aim was to raise the status of the profession by promoting understanding of just how skilled and complex social work with older people is.

Professor Paul Willis

And secondly, here's Dr Jason Schaub, also from the University of Birmingham, principal investigator on the LOASCA study.

Dr Jason Schaub

Yeah, so this was a two and a half year study to undertake an examination of the way that social care workers assess older people, particularly older LGBT people. And the things we were interested in were, the way that they think and ask about sexual orientation and gender identity and how they go about supporting older people to be getting as diverse and sort of nuanced services as they should be getting.

Professor Paul Willis

I think it's fair to say the social work of older people often gets less attention than work of children and families, and there can be a tendency to group older people together with not enough regard to individual identities. Here are some of the reasons why members of the SWOP and LOASCA teams believe including a diverse range of voices is so important.

Reshma

As a disabled person I supported my mum and my dad through all their care assessments and I felt it's really important that the Asian voice is often not heard. And the only way we could ensure that the older people's voices are heard is to be part of the steering committee.

Nargis

So when my mum's social worker comes and she's actually not giving me the correct information, I haven't got the confidence to actually speak up and challenge that. Unfortunately I have lost that power, just being a carer.

Izzy

I spent my life being a social worker in various guises. I had a set of skills that I thought would be useful. I'm a gay woman, I surround myself with gay women. I have knowledge, the whole range of skills that could be utilised.

Graham

Why was I interested in the role? Because we are all growing older aren't we and I believe very strongly in service provision and its improvement from beginning to end of our lives because that's the way we value people.

Cecilia

Knowing a lot of people in the trans community there were some quite negative experiences of healthcare, GPs etc. So I'm interested in what's their experience is going to be like, should they come to have contact with social services regarding care.

Professor Paul Willis

We know that there are an increasing number of older people out there requiring social care services. But I was keen to hear from Jason why he felt it was so important that his study should focus on people who identify as LGBTQ+.

Dr Jason Schaub

Social care services don't really understand how many LGBTQ+ older people that they're working with, which means that they then can't create and design services that support them. The other element is the fact that social care workers, there's some evidence, don't have as much knowledge about this population as would be useful. So they struggle with what the particular needs might be. They struggle with why their issues might be something that they would need to consider specifically. And then the third element is the fact that this population, differently than other minority groups, are less likely to have familial support and they're also less likely to have children, which we know for older people is often a source of support.

Professor Paul Willis

A critical member of the SWOP team was Gerry Nosowska, who runs a specialist social work consultancy called Effective Practice. Gerry's network was a great help recruiting people to the expert panel. She's a huge advocate for including non-academic experts and service users in research. For Gerry, the benefits go beyond inclusivity.

Gerry Nosowska

What works well is in involving people is that you see straightaway the benefits, there's huge benefits from people being involved. Immediately there's questions and curiosity and challenge that helps you change things and do things for the better. And as you know, from the beginning when we were sharing some of the tools we were going to use with older people, we were getting really important feedback about how to do that. And it's also more fun. One of the older people on the expert advisory group wrote a poem about the experience of being involved in the group and added a few stanzas after each meeting. And that brought a whole different perspective and voice and freshness to what we were trying to do and was really engaging in a way that researchers and the project as a whole wouldn't have been.

Professor Paul Willis

That expert advisor was Graham, and here he is with his poetic take on SWOP.

Graham

So this poem is called Beginning to Live Again.

Growing old need not be a curse.
Albeit ageism the devil to slay.
We found the same social worker preferred.
Of course, made real only
if public awareness was in play.
The SWOP research project sought to say
how it is with ten social workers
and 17 older people in the frame
in two communities of wide disparity
but with common happenings.
Age 65 to 99, the observed were not cases.
They were known by name.

Professor Paul Willis

It seems kind of obvious, doesn't it that getting to know people by name has the potential to shift our perceptions. Dr Dora Jandric was a research fellow on LOASCA and she reflects on how building awareness within the team was just as important as engagement outside.

Dr Dora Jandric

All the co-researchers said getting to know people in person was one of the most positive things that they had because when they got into the project, they knew themselves, but they didn't know anyone else. And even though they all identify as LGBTQ+, some of them said, you know, I'm not aware of trans issues, for example, or I'm not aware of gay men because I'm a lesbian woman, so I don't have any contact. But being in this group made them aware and they talked and they had discussions, and I think some of them actually became quite good friends towards the end of it.

Professor Paul Willis

It's also not surprising that when you start to combine networks amongst older people, there are real benefits for recruitment.

Dr Dora Jandric

if you're doing research about older people, with older people, you can use those older people to recruit other older people. So they have their groups, their networks, Facebook groups or physical groups, or they go to the local library and they might know other people who will be interested in participating in our research. So that's always a good thing if you're doing academic research to have someone from the

population that you're researching as part of your project team who can then reach out to that population and get them on board.

Gerry Nosowska

The people who've been involved in it all want to go on and do more work around social work with older people in particular and advocating for that. One of the things that's happening at the moment is that the British Association of Social Workers is starting to set up a special interest group around aging. Hopefully that will get off the ground and be a place for social workers alongside people's lived experience to advocate, around this area of practice.

Professor Paul Willis

Translating research recommendations into good practice is never a given and is often slow. So it's really heartening to hear that the benefits of working collaboratively in this case were felt way before publication.

Dr Jason Schaub

Over the course of this study, one of the things that happened for each one of the local authorities is that they implemented either strategies or action plans or changes about the way that they supported older LGBT people. And their senior managers were very engaged in trying to identify ways to improve their service and listen to our recommendations consistently throughout the study. It's humbling in some respects as an academic, because it's really apparent that they bring a sense of validity for the people that are listening to a study that me as an academic am just not able to bring to the table.

Dr Denise Tanner

Given our role as academics, we come from positions of privilege in many ways, people we're working with and researching are not often in the same position. It's important to acknowledge diversity and inequalities that people experience, and we can best do that by engaging directly with them to give us that broader perspective.

Professor Paul Willis

In part two, we're going to take a deeper look beyond why we should work collaboratively and focus on how working with older people strengthens the research itself and continues to keep us academics on our toes.